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Multiple Perspectives on Long-Term and Contemporary Time. What Futures Are Possible?

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Multiple Perspectives on Long-Term and Contemporary Time. What Futures Are Possible?

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REFERENCES

T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017

The Present of the Future, Zurich: Diaphanes, 2017. Ed. by Kerstin Stakemeier, Susanne Witzgall

Knut Ebeling, *There Is No Now: An Archaeology of Contemporaneity*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017, (The Contemporary Condition)

- 1 Although they are antithetical at first glance, two concerns of the thought of our times – mental and affective projection on a geological scale, and intensive questioning of the present – are in fact inseparable. Despite the fact that they often overlook the intellectual tradition from which they partly originate, thus claiming an originality that eclipses the very roots of modernity, debates on the “Anthropocene”, which now receive wide attention and are fully institutionalised, nevertheless bear witness to an unprecedented realisation of historical reciprocity between long-term and present day scales.¹ To move away from the present in order to adopt the perspective of long-term historical, or even natural, evolution of the species, in its complex relationship to the environment, has proven to be a way for humanities, art, and literature to periodically disengage from the flow and profusion of things in the present in order to gain a clearer understanding of ensembles, risks and outcomes. Since humanity entered the atomic age, the interdependence of local and global levels, as well as instant and long-term time has distinctly started structuring intellectual and artistic practices and discourses. The

expansion of the debate around the “Anthropocene” has amplified this dynamic as well as displaced it: in recent years, the catastrophism of the “moment” of the explosion has expanded to the point where it has adjusted to the slowness of the extinction of life. The verticality of “decision” has shattered into a multitude of economic and political responsibilities.

- 2 Although the word “Anthropocene” was able to impose itself through its first lexeme, whose roots in the Western intellectual tradition require little proof, the objections it has triggered for this very reason are ever-increasing, rendering the term already obsolete. T.J. Demos’s essay *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* is one expression of this critical tendency, to which it contributes mainly through its analysis of the artistic uses of the Anthropocene. Challenging the overwhelming universalism of the concept, which overlooks the critical legacy of the idea of “difference” – be it race, class, gender or species-related – T.J. Demos considers the artistic equivalents of this universalism deceptive, because some artists, among whom Edward Burtynsky and Louis Helbig are the most characteristic, aestheticize the Anthropocene. According to T.J. Demos, the distinctive feature of the photographers’ work is that their pictures of over-exploited spaces, such as an oil field or a coastline hidden by the toxic vapours released by pipes transporting fossil fuel, are always overly-distant, synthetic and bathed in opalescent light. Through his use of the notion of the “petro-industrial sublime”, the author suggests these artistic endeavours are connected to a tradition that has helped assert the autonomy of the subject and its domination over nature since the dawn of modernity. The fact the pictures are taken from above seems to divert their critical purpose, thus naturalising capitalism. Capitalism’s harmful nature is therefore transformed into a negative pleasure, which, in every respect, conforms to the definition of the sublime. The issues T.J. Demos raises also summon up the memory of another debate, which, although it is at least one hundred years old, is still topical: the Marxist criticism of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), and particularly its photographic output. Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and the not as staunchly Marxist Siegfried Kracauer, wrote, in essence, that to state “the world is beautiful” (Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Die Welt ist schön*, 1928), is tantamount to blurring all the material conditions and concrete human experiences connected to the production of the “beautiful” objects which fill the world, if only they were looked at differently.² However, the three Weimar-era thinkers did credit images with the possibility of a singular critical function, which is not quite T.J. Demos’s case. His positive analyses of other, more diagrammatic or cartographic representations of the Anthropocene, in which the image is allied and restricted by writing and other, less emphatic notation systems, lead to the deduction that the author somewhat distrusts images, although this is never explicitly formulated.
- 3 Long-duration time is also part of media-theoretician Knut Ebeling’s reflections devoted to the question of the “contemporary”, which is just as much a subject of debate. In his explicit title, *There is No Now: An Archaeology of Contemporaneity*, Ebeling draws on the Derridean criticism of presence, in order both to thicken and to open the slender contemporaneity of the digital age. Proclaiming the materialism of his approach, which he contrasts with the abstract transcendence often typical of philosophical discourses on time, Knut Ebeling stresses the importance of objects in the construction of temporal experience, as was done, for instance, by Peter Galison in his study *Einstein’s Clocks and Poincaré’s Maps: Empires of Time*.³ Rather than seeing time as an abstract *a priori* inherent to human thought, Knut Ebeling insists on its palpable production by habits shaped by

media such as radio, followed by live programmes, then television, and nowadays, the Internet. But this duality between abstract and material time is questionable, as *a priori* time is not the same as its experience as an *a priori*. Knut Ebeling constructs his problem through contrasts. On the one hand is his own approach, which he describes as materialist and archeological, and on the other are philosophical and historical approaches. These disciplines are suddenly reduced to mere methods. One of the themes that spans this unquestionably rich and erudite essay, is indeed the *paragone* of disciplines, led by media theory cast as a troublemaker. In this analysis, philosophy is criticised for its excessive abstraction and transcendence, whereas history is seen as overly dependent on written documents, narration and the linear succession of time. This appears to be a highly metaphysical understanding of history. Who would reduce history, as it has been thought and written for over a century, to exaggerated historicism? Like all human sciences, history has practiced its critical vocation upon itself, opening to objects, materialities, gestures and images; thus avoiding narrowly realistic narration in order to orchestrate numerous perspectives on time. Many historians would be willing to subscribe to Ebeling's theory which, inspired by Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, defends the heterogeneity of the present. This theory evokes the strata that make up the present as being at once the remains of the past and the seeds of the future.

- 4 Without renouncing the critical vocation that constitutes the unsurpassable horizon of a protracted modernity, let us try, rather, to reach a qualified, concrete, moderate and punctual understanding of potentiality. *The Present of the Future* is an edited volume stemming from an interdisciplinary research programme at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts and edited by Susanne Witzgall and Kerstin Stakemeier. It aims at conceptualising the future; that is, to leave behind the dark horizon we have grown used to contemplating. The two, somewhat overly-obvious, distinctions between *present future* (how the present pictures the future) and the *future present* (the future that will actually take place) which the publication offers, are not particularly illuminating (p. 19, 27-32). Despite its dialogical nature (each essay is followed by the transcript of the discussion that followed its spoken presentation), this book maps subjective, uncertain, speculative, inward-looking and solitary quests. They all try to forego planning the future, what philosopher Frédéric Neyrat terms the “clairvoyant” society (p. 79-95), an intensified version of the “society of control” analysed by Gilles Deleuze. Drawing on the dialectic of night and day, of timelessness and time, originally developed by the mytho-poet Schelling, Frédéric Neyrat sketches out two possible futures. One is a menacing timeless future, a flat and sterile temporality; the other is an original night, both matrix and child, that we can hope to see occur through radical politics. In a similar spirit, Kerstin Stakemeier encourages us to stop thinking of the catastrophe of historical time in order to thrust this catastrophe into ourselves and be freed from the normative powers that have shaped us. Conceptualising time as a play on scales; the need to reactivate critical and materialistic demands, while remaining convinced that these demands are connected to the never-ending work on subjectivity; so that the future, as an interruption of the order of things, may happen: these are, roughly outlined, some of the ideas that connect the three books, however furtively or fortuitously.

NOTES

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour's discourses on the Anthropocene emerge from the acknowledgement that the projection of modern consciousness on a geological scale is, to a certain extent unprecedented. This enables Chakrabarty to suggest a Hegelian reading of modern history (the universal, the particular and their synthesis), and enables Latour to protect the soundness of his theory in *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993, Harvard University Press), according to which modernity is the mere development of progress. Modernity, however, is much more complex than a simple linear narrative, as proven by the strict contemporaneity of acceleration and long durations in 21st century historical consciousness. I have attempted a critique of the "first time" trope in discourses on the Anthropocene in my article « All the time in the world. Art and Prehistory », *Artforum*, March 2018, vol. 56, n°7, p. 202-214.
 2. Benjamin, Walter. *Petite histoire de la photographie*, Paris: Allia, 2012 ; Bloch, Ernst. *Héritage de ce temps*, Paris: Klincksieck, 2017; Kracauer, Siegfried. *Les Employés : aperçus de l'Allemagne nouvelle* (1929), Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012.
 3. Galison, Peter. *Einstein's Clocks and Poincaré's Maps: Empires of Time*, London, New York, W.W. Norton & co, 2004
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Maria Stavriniaki is a lecturer and accredited research director at the University Paris 1-Panthéon Sorbonne. Her recent and upcoming publications include *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art History* (Stanford University Press, 2016), *Contraindre à la liberté : Carl Einstein et les avant-gardes, l'histoire* (Les Presses du réel, 2018) and *Le Sujet et son milieu : huit textes sur les avant-gardes allemandes* (Mamco, 2017).